

HENRY JAMES
AND THE LANGUAGE
OF EXPERIENCE

COLLIN MEISSNER



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK <http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk>
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA <http://www.cup.org>
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

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First published 1999

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in Baskerville 10½/12pt [CE]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Meissner, Collin.

Henry James and the language of experience / Collin Meissner.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index

ISBN 0 521 62398 7 (hardback)

1. James, Henry, 1843-1916 - Political and social views.
2. Language and languages - Political aspects. 3. James, Henry, 1843-1916 - Language.
4. Aesthetics - Political aspects.
5. Consciousness in literature. 6. Experience in literature.

I. Title.

PS2127.P6M45 1999

813'.4-dc21 98-39565 CIP

ISBN 0 521 62398 7 hardback

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CHAPTER I

The experience of Jamesian hermeneutics

An old story goes that Cimabue was struck with admiration when he saw the shepherd-boy, Giotto, sketching sheep. But, according to true biographies, it is never the sheep that inspire such a man as Giotto with the love of painting; but rather, his first sight of the paintings of such a man as Cimabue. What makes the artist is the circumstance that in his youth he was more deeply moved by his first sight of works of art than by that of the things which they portray.

Andre Malraux, *The Psychology of Art*

I

I should say right away that my purpose in this book is not to construct an argument about hermeneutics as a general theory, but rather to give an account of James's hermeneutics in his own terms. To this extent, then, my goal throughout has been to try as much as I can to foreground James's own language while making secondary criticism an important "secondary" partner. My focus has been to try and clarify what is perhaps the most elusive concept in James's writings – his idea of experience.¹ I will argue that James's hermeneutics is a hermeneutics of experience, but "experience" in what sense? If we consult James's Prefaces, we find a heterogeneous array of usages: experience as a general term, a formative concept in art, as something from which we are disconnected, as a fine flower, a germ, something which we lack, or which comprises "human communities," or as something by which we are assaulted. But perhaps most of all, for James "experience" is "our apprehension and our measure of what happens to us as social creatures," as he says in his Preface to *The Princess Casamassima*.² To be sure, experience in James is an affair of consciousness, but it is also intersubjec-

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tive and social. Indeed, it is something James's readers as well as his characters undergo.

In the empiricist tradition experience is characterized in terms of sensations and impressions. It is principally an occupation of the eyes. James's work is rooted in and enriches this tradition, but it is not confined to it. For him, experience is rather something one lives through or suffers. I find it useful to think of this process dialectically as a movement of bewilderment and enlightenment, where experience is something one acquires, but chiefly through loss or failure or the breakdown of things. Indeed, Jamesian experience reveals itself to be a fundamentally negative process in that typically James's narratives dramatize a collision between competing "fields of knowledge, types of normativity, and forms of subjectivity."³ Throughout his writings James consistently exposes nativist conventions and conscious or unconscious transfigurations of reality as constructs whose aim is to allow the interpreting or experiencing subject to exert some measure of control over external circumstances. The extent to which these manipulations are successful is the extent to which these individuals are ultimately unaware. James's fiction directly challenges individuals like Mrs. Newsome, *The American's* Madame de Bellegarde, or *The Turn of the Screw's* Mrs. Costello who profess objective standards of ethical behavior while actually hiding behind what Paul Armstrong has referred to as "culturally contingent customs that organize experience along particular lines and that owe their existence to the agreement of the community to practice them" (*Phenomenology*, 5). Jamesian hermeneutics puts under scrutiny this question of codified ways of knowing and modes of behavior we take so much for granted that we have become not only unaware but the unwitting victims of their manipulative effect on our daily lives.

By focusing on experience with a hermeneutical-phenomenological understanding of what that entails I can correct misconceptions about James's aesthetics and politics which are now widely circulating. Notions of the political which neglect its rootedness in experience misrepresent James and misconceive the problems of power, of subjectivity, and of understanding as he develops them in his work. If my argument is correct, my analysis of the consequences of experience should offer a way of reading literature which first foregrounds the danger of taking experience as the origin of knowledge, and then enables literature to contest directly the

hegemony of ideological systems which base their ascendancy on the subtle manipulation of the subject's (meaning, again, character's and reader's) consciousness. The reason I use the vocabulary of hermeneutics and phenomenology instead of that more closely associated with cultural criticism is that hermeneutics offers a way of looking at experience that highlights the important dialectic between the subject's private consciousness and his or her social construction. For this reason I claim that a hermeneutic-phenomenological politics of experience and subjectivity offers a more provocative understanding of culture and identity in James than the Foucauldian and New Historicist social theories which now hold sway. Often these latter theories depend upon essentializing interpretive categories and neglect the powerful dialectic which takes place within and without the subject's consciousness as a private and public arena wherein the most compelling principles of political and cultural life are dramatized – an experience, I argue, the James text inevitably makes the reader encounter as well. To this extent my argument attempts to correct theories of the political in James which are not based on experience and to point out that *any* adequate theory of culture, society, and history needs to be experientially based. James's work, from his first stories and early novels, his travel sketches, through his discovery of a distinct voice in his middle phase, including his disastrous venture as a dramatist, and on into the late masterpieces and critical commentaries consistently reveals a writer finely attuned to the way in which our conditioned experience of "experience" shapes our perception of all that we come into contact with, including our perception of self.

While I deal throughout this book with texts that cover the full range of James's career, I concentrate on three major novels in particular detail: *The American* (1877), *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), and *The Ambassadors* (1903). These texts cover the trajectory of James's career and reveal, in concentrated detail, his response to Europe and how the development of an international theme offered him the opportunity to produce a form of art which would provoke engagement (*The American*). In writing *The Portrait of a Lady*, James experiences a moment of insight, an epiphany that reveals the power of art in sharp detail, in constructing Isabel's night vigil of chapter forty-two, and comes to see how the novel can function as a vehicle of self-discovery for its audience, not through didacticism, but through a manner of autodidacticism or autogenesis wherein the reader comes

to enjoy the double privilege of being both the subject and object of the text. James came to call this discovery his center of consciousness technique, the full narrative power of which is perhaps best displayed in *The Ambassadors*. This text returns to *The American* and absorbs the more external nature of that text into Lambert Strether's intense investigations into his own subjectivity as it is opened before him by what we could say is an extended vigil of the sort Isabel Archer experiences. In *The Ambassadors* James's persistent investigations into foreignness, cultural and personal, into subjectivity, public and private, and into how our ability to experience these conditions is itself a production all come together in a hermeneutic method whose revelatory force is stunning, even to himself, as his autobiographical works make apparent. These texts show the poignant refinements of James's aesthetics and reveal, in the developments one can trace along the trajectory of James's career, the growth of a distinctly Jamesian hermeneutics rooted in the belief that asking how and why we have particular experiences and how and what they mean to us is the only way an individual or a culture can break free of the manipulative forces that forever threaten one's interpretive sovereignty. It is for this reason James adjured his audience to cultivate perception as a form of understanding, adjured his audience to be open to experience since in one's openness lay the potential for growth and development as well as freedom from confinement. James formulates the basic structure of this injunction in the Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* when he attests to the "high price of the novel" being rooted in its "power" to range freely over "all the varieties of outlook on life . . . created by conditions that are never the same from man to man" (1074–75).

It is perhaps here, in James's documentation of the process through which one's understanding of experience and of one's self is, as Ross Posnock has argued, "itself dependent on the production of narratives derived from cultural imagery," that the subtle power of Jamesian hermeneutics gains its full force and reveals its deeply political consequences for the individual (*Trial of Curiosity*, 67). One can look to *The Ambassadors* as an explanatory example, but almost any James text would be similarly exemplary. We recall how in *The Ambassadors's* outline James tells us that the story will be of a man who comes out on the other side of his experience changed. But in what way is he changed? How does the change register itself on Strether and on James's audience? The answer, the text shows, is that Strether has finally become himself and America is exposed in

such a way that it can never again be for him, and for readers of his experience, what it once was. In effect, Strether's embassy overthrows the self-aggrandizing certitude which had come to characterize American cultural and political ideology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Paris relentlessly contests and challenges Strether's imported notions of behavior and systematically exposes Mrs. Newsome's Woollett as a land of genteel hypocrisy characterized by a deceitful moral prudery. Rather than enable self-development, Woollett, and by extension, America, James suggests, undermines the country's celebrated freedom to self-determination by consistently reminding the individual that things must be done "by the book," to paraphrase Mrs. Newsome. This unflinching rigidity is behind Daisy Miller's death, entombs Catherine Sloper, and all but exterminates Lambert Strether. In remarking on this aspect of James's politics, Robert Dawidoff argues that "Strether's experience speaks to the feelings of dislocation from the inside out," and that these experiences reveal James's deeply held belief that the "prevailing American genteel moralism was degenerate morality," whose goal, he felt "had to do with keeping the enterprise of American business culture going behind a veneer of professed ideals" (*Genteel Tradition*, 135, 97).

Capturing, exposing, and taking one through the process of recovery from the inscription of a cultural hegemony is the project of Jamesian hermeneutics. For this reason the language of hermeneutics, which always has as its goal an explanation of how understanding and interpretation occur and why they occur as they do, is particularly suited to reading James. In exposing the hidden conditions of belonging to a culture and the inherent disenfranchisement belonging demands, James's fiction cultivates a politics of individuality whose ultimate consequence is the arming of its readers with a new vision of the expenses and requirements of membership. "In political terms," as Posnock explains, James's fiction allows one to see a culture's power structures, to see how a culture operates via "the rigid identification with one role or place" and how freedom depends upon "a dynamic of shifting involvements that resist finitude and definition" (*Trial of Curiosity*, 76). In being armed through awareness, readers of James achieve a heightened and potentially threatening level of emancipation, not because they will put down a text like *The Ambassadors* and erect barricades, but because they will not again be such easy and unwitting participants in their own production and control. Think

again of Strether, "he begins as a failure and ends liberated from success," as Dawidoff puts it. *The Ambassadors* "records his piercing of the ideology that imprisons him" and shows a way beyond the singularity produced and promoted by America's mercantile culture (*Genteel Tradition*, 135).

So, by examining the hermeneutic and phenomenological aspects of experience, viewing experience as an event which is individually lived and socially mediated, my analysis challenges the prevailing analyses of James which follow a Foucauldian line of inquiry. The most powerful example of this line of thought remains Mark Seltzer's *Henry James and the Art of Power*. Seltzer's critique of James's blindness to the epistemological coerciveness of power offers a powerful reading of James's conception of knowledge and experience. Seltzer rightly points out that Jamesian criticism has steadfastly assumed a "radical opposition between aesthetics and politics" in James's work, and has persisted in reading him as "the very exemplar of an aesthetic outside the circuit of power" (156, 147). And to the extent that Seltzer exposes "the ruses that have maintained an opposition between the art of the novel and the subject of power," he has successfully "changed the rules by which we speak of the politics of the novel," at least insofar as James is a participant in the forum (24). But Seltzer's argument depends upon a slight misreading of James, one produced by the very aesthetic power structure Seltzer claims has unjustly imprisoned James. For Seltzer's argument to work, James *must* be the genteel aesthete who "tries to protect the aesthetic by displacing the reality of power with an artful illusion" (134-35). Thus, Seltzer describes what he calls the "double discourse of the Jamesian text," a discursive practice "that at once represses and acknowledges a discreet continuity between literary and political practices" and shows how the end product of this double discourse reveals James's "complicity and rigorous continuity with the larger social regimes of mastery and control" embodied throughout his work (148, 15, 13). In short, Seltzer's argument turns James into a version of Mrs. Newsome, Woollett's doyenne, who governs everything through a strict management of reality.

Seltzer's assessment of the (James) novel as a "relay of mechanisms of social control" which "engages in an aesthetic rewriting of power" is largely accurate, but Seltzer ultimately avoids a crucial aspect of James's texts, and the novel in general. James would agree with Seltzer that "[a]rt and power are not at odds in the novel"

(149). But James would say the important discovery in that underlying architecture is not that art and power interanimate each other, but what one does with both art and power. Rather than artfully reinscribing the status quo's power structures, James's work frees the subject by making that subject aware of the economies of power which exert influence at culture's visible and invisible levels. And while that awareness which I will show is the purpose behind James's writing may itself be a form of power, that power is enabling rather than imprisoning. What Seltzer's account neglects to consider is the personal nature of experience in one's political, social, and historical transactions. Any account of James and the novel in general must consider another double discourse, that between a subject's private reflections on any given event and the social discourse which inscribes that event. This dialectic is perhaps the only means available for one to escape the pressures of the external world, while at the same time coming to understand how those pressures have acted like an invisible hand which has shaped the way one comes to understand experiences in the first place.

In marking the radical split between the privately understood or desired and publicly constructed or contained notions of self, James puts his finger on the rift he saw as specifically produced by modern culture's unswerving attention to the acquisition of material goods. His fiction and criticism relentlessly approach, embrace, and expose commercialism's multifold influences on the individual subject's daily life, as well as its impact on the culture's day-to-day and historical activities. James's fiction registers these tensions by setting virtually all the events within an advanced capitalist economy which forms the super-structural backdrop against which the events, and the characters' experience and understanding of those events, are undergone, interpreted, and, eventually, by way of reading, pressed upon the reader's consciousness. One could say the coercive force of capital is the politics of experience in James's texts, that the political content discovered in reading James is the manipulative force of capital which begins as an emancipating tool of consumption and winds up imprisoning the individual and culture in a world where consumption becomes the only form of meaning and meaning itself is divested of any higher significance than commodity exchange. It is perhaps this aspect of James's narratives that has led Peggy McCormack to conclude that "James's novels depict recognizably, even aggressively, capitalist societies," whose characters are frighteningly

reduced to “respond[ing] to this setting as if it were an exchange economy in which they survive and hope to prosper by practicing whatever form of commodities transaction they can afford.” One such practice, McCormack argues, consists in the characters “displaying their human assets as cultural commodities valuable only when made public or exchanged in interaction” (*Rule of Money*, 2). James’s concerns with the intellectual and artistic astringencies produced by such a culture can be felt at every stage of his work and include even his own conception of himself as an artist whose public success remained by and large unattained. In fact, we can see James negotiating the terrain of the exchange economy McCormack describes in his remarks about Isabel Archer from the Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*. James likens himself to a “dealer” in rare goods who has a “precious object” he may choose not to “‘realise’” by keeping it “locked up indefinitely rather than commit it, at no matter what price, to vulgar hands” (1076). James’s refusal strikes me as a direct remark upon the subjective divestiture required by a commercial culture, which is how he understood America to be singularly organized, a point he makes bluntly in one of his travel essays for *The Nation* in 1878 when he explains America’s defining characteristic as being composed of a people that is “exclusively commercial” (“Americans Abroad,” 209). In 1900 the German philosopher Georg Simmel published a lengthy study, *The Philosophy of Money*, that captures exactly the sense of the age which permeates James’s work and provides some important background to the social psychology as well as the practical politics at play in James’s fiction. The central point of Simmel’s work is that a money culture produces a radical split between the objective and subjective sides of human beings, with a powerful predominance of the one over the other – and where the one (the objective) is defined by the intellect and the other (the subjective) by feeling. Simmel’s thesis helps us understand James’s concentration in his fiction on the way consciousness works to understand experience since, as Simmel says, “Money has provided us with the sole possibility for uniting people while excluding everything personal and specific” from the business of living (345).

In a way, Simmel’s text draws out the background of James’s novels and helps us to understand better the super-structural framework James is operating with. What Simmel’s argument foregrounds is the extent to which not only interpersonal relations and public

transactions are conceived of as value-added instances of communication, what James refers to as the “perpetual passionate pecuniary purpose” embodied in New York (*American Scene*, 111), but the extent to which money has skewed the intellect and converted it into an essentially featureless, faceless, impersonal, and generally disinterested faculty, an “indifferent mirror of reality” whose sole practical purpose is entirely absorbed in the relation of ends and means, where money is the end and everything else is the means (*Philosophy of Money*, 432). It is against this backdrop that James stages his interactive investigation into the function of perception and experience in understanding. James understood with remarkable clarity the economic basis of the aesthetic as well as the integral relationship between avarice and art. While his fiction is full of instances which illuminate this point, perhaps the letter Hyacinth Robinson writes from Venice, a Renaissance mercantile capital, most directly acknowledges the material circumstances of aesthetic production. We recall how at this point in *The Princess Casamassima* Hyacinth is caught between his commitment to revolutionary upheaval and the “inestimably precious and beautiful” art he finds throughout Europe. Torn, he realizes the lukewarm feelings he has for Hoffendahl’s plot in comparison with his passionate commitment to the aesthetic which now seems worth whatever price civilization pays.

The monuments and treasures of art, the great palaces and properties, the conquests of learning and taste, the general fabric of civilisation as we know it, based if you will upon all the despotisms, the cruelties, the exclusions, the monopolies and the rapacities of the past, but thanks to which, all the same, the world is less of a “bloody sell” and life more of a lark.⁴

At this point Hyacinth is articulating James’s understanding of what the full compass of aesthetic production looks like. But James also understood that the audience for his works was one produced by a money culture which had reduced value to its purely commercial and material elements and was, as a result, generally suspicious of art’s unquantifiability. Think here of the vague but ubiquitous commercial enterprises which govern *The Ambassadors*’s Woollett, or of James’s voiced dismay at the pecuniary motives behind the establishment of New York’s Metropolitan Museum where the focus of attention rested on the “money in the air, ever so much money, grossly expressed” for “acquisition,” rather than the works of art the

museum would hold (*American Scene*, 192). To bridge this gap between the crass economic conditions his audience understood and the aesthetic values it beheld with suspicion, James embodied both within his fiction, showing them to be alternate sides of the same mobile. The mobile analogy is apt because for James the aesthetic and the material were not specifically distinct but often flowed into one another, as he saw was the case with the Metropolitan Museum which he understood was “going to be great” and which would carry out an “Education” that “was to be exclusively that of the sense of beauty” (193, 192). It is for this reason that throughout his work James keeps turning the mobile around, now revealing its crass economic imprint, now its illustration of the beauty of form. In this way James’s work gives precedence to the aesthetic while still acknowledging the material conditions of its production. This is not to say that James educated his audience to see art in acquisitive and monetary terms, like an Adam Verver; rather, by showing art as extending the economic and even making its own value-added contribution to one’s ability to understand and live a more perceptive and engaging life, James began a process of recovery in which the subject’s consciousness could be freed from the imprisoning and manipulative economic influences that go with what Simmel calls the relentless “broadening of consumption” that characterizes a money culture (*Philosophy of Money*, 455). In other words, what James’s novels do is aggressively educate and shape their reader’s understanding first that he is being manipulated to be one way and not another by cultural forces beyond his control, and then, in identifying this coercive process, allow the reader to take over the business of becoming individual which, in James’s mind, meant becoming responsive and perceptive, something art was particularly good at fostering.

Not surprisingly, the language of hermeneutics and phenomenology especially focuses on just this interpretive revelation and for this reason is particularly suited to developing a methodology for reading James, especially given that James constructed his narrative method specifically so as to provoke an epistemological crisis in his reading audience, a crisis whose primary event is to make the reader aware of how much interpretation is always already a product of interpretation. So James actually does change the politics of the novel, as Seltzer rightly argues. Only he does so not through a “reinscription of power within the ostensibly ‘powerless’ discourse of

the novel,” but by making the novel a marketplace in which the economies of power are displayed. In reading a James text the reader is made aware of power’s presence, and in being made aware made free insofar as freedom is possible and desirable.⁵ So rather than being blind to the epistemological coerciveness of power, James is potently aware of power’s multifold discourses and his representation of experience seeks to make visible those invisible power structures in such a way that the reading audience can find in his novels the ultimate escape, not into a fantasy world, but into a world that is suddenly made clear and a self that is finally one’s own. What I suggest is that James makes this emancipation available to his audience through an unavoidable and subtle lesson about the nature of experience, rather than removing the potentially liberating capacity of the novel by forging a “criminal continuity between art and power,” as Seltzer asserts (*Henry James and the Art of Power*, 170).

Students of James will recognize the debt my study owes to Paul Armstrong’s *The Phenomenology of Henry James*, but they will also recognize how this study departs in significant ways, primarily through its more specific focus on how the hermeneutics of experience, particularly in light of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s claim that experience has a liberating, reorientating negativity about it, offers a way of reading James that can help us get past the opposition between formalism and historicism which has placed contemporary criticism in a state of semi-paralysis. Since Armstrong’s study follows a more purely phenomenological path, he omits Gadamer’s hermeneutical branch of phenomenology. And while Gadamer comes out of the phenomenological tradition, namely that of Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Husserl, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein, he sees understanding as less an act of transcendental consciousness (Husserl), and more as an event in which we come to understand how we stand in relation to other people, to ourselves, and to our immediate historical situation. For Gadamer understanding presupposes belonging to a tradition and is always of a subject matter. Gadamer continually forces us to ask what light a text throws on what matters to us. In addition, understanding always entails application; it cannot be the solitary act of a disengaged ego because understanding a text entails understanding the claim it has upon you. According to Gadamer’s hermeneutics, one is always exposed to the text one seeks to understand and understanding itself always takes the form of action. The applicability of Gadamer’s hermeneutics, his analysis of herme-

neutical situations and how one comes to understand them, is thus directly relevant to the hermeneutic struggle James's characters experience. For while Husserl's phenomenology or Foucauldian methodologies can help explain the larger social texts or "discourses" which determine meaning in, say, Woollett and, to some extent, in Paris, Gadamer's hermeneutics is much more able to capture the subtleties behind the epistemological crises that not only characters such as Strether, or Christopher Newman, or Isabel Archer, but readers too experience through the course of experiencing a James novel. And by clarifying how we come to understand the subtleties of James's text, Gadamer helps us to appreciate not just the vital and actively engaged quality of Jamesian aesthetics, but also to understand how James allows us to return terms like "consciousness," "subjectivity," and "experience" to critical discourse without either essentializing, reifying, or psychologizing them.

II

As I have mentioned, for James experience is "our apprehension and our measure of what happens to us as social creatures"(1091). But this understanding is complicated. Within James's work two rival and incompatible theories of experience exist. On the one hand there is a cumulative theory which understands experience as something to be acquired. The fundamental flaw in this view is that it privileges the immediacy of experience without offering any ground on which to question the primary nature of the subject's disposition toward it. To this extent subjects find in the experience a reflection of all they bring to it, a vision ultimately secured by the particular experience. In other words, by focusing on experience as a purely external phenomenon, the subject – whether character or reader – wanders endlessly in a hermeneutic circle. In *The Princess Casamassima* James refers to this self-ratifying interpretive quandary, at its worst, as a wandering "blindly, obstructedly, in a kind of eternal dirty intellectual fog" (5:340). What James seems to be referring to here is our willingness, as "social creatures," to resign, for convenience, our "apprehension" to the authority of interpretive hegemonies precisely because we mistakenly limit our notion of experience to a purely external encounter and never ask why we are disposed either to have or understand a particular experience. As Joan Scott shows of

experience in general, the “evidence of experience,” as an evidentiary and interpretive concept, has traditionally been naturalized as evidence which “reproduces rather than contests given ideological systems” (“Experience,” 25). Scott’s argument about the need to historicize “the notion of experience” is directly relevant to the conception of experience as it functions in James’s hermeneutics (34). As Scott points out, by accepting experience as “the origin of knowledge” we ineluctably accept the “vision of the individual subject” as the “bedrock of evidence upon which explanation is built.” But this interpretive move has grave consequences, not the least of which is that we leave unasked “[q]uestions about the nature of experience,” about the diverse constitutions of subjects, “about how one’s vision is structured – about language (or discourse) and history” (25). One is reminded of James’s characterization of Mrs. Newsome as “all cold thought,” as an agent who operates via an understanding which simply “doesn’t admit surprises” (22:220).

Here too, in the way we fall prey to the manipulative ordering and validation of experience Scott speaks of, we find James’s attention to the subtle manipulations by which a money culture shapes the way we see and understand. In explaining the historical connection between money and value, Simmel addresses a point James’s novels consistently investigate and which Scott foregrounds as the dubious claim to objective veracity inherent in asserting “the evidence of experience” as the foundation upon which “explanation is built” (25). As Simmel points out, the value of “objects, thoughts and events can never be inferred from their mere natural existence and content” since their value has nothing to do with their “natural ordering” and everything to do with the constructed valuation we place on them. And when we speak of valuation conceptually we mean “the whole world viewed from a particular vantage point.” In a conclusion James and Scott would share, Simmel explains how we “are rarely aware of the fact that our whole life, from the point of view of consciousness, consists in experiencing and judging values,” and that our life “acquires meaning and significance,” from values which are socially produced (*Philosophy of Money*, 59, 60). Not surprisingly, in James’s novels value is more often than not produced by individuals whose commercial success has elevated them to the status of bearer of meaning and allows them to shape the direction and interpretation of both the culture at large and the understanding of individual experiences within that hegemony. The latter half of

this power is what James found particularly disturbing. Another way of saying this would be that Mrs. Newsome has the financial power to determine what constitutes an experience and how that experience is understood in Woollett, and her power to carry this out comes both from the mercantile influence she wields and the community's willing compliance with those values.

Mrs. Newsome and her Woollett hermeneutics constitute a conceptual framework which authorizes experience and reality for everyone and everything within the shadow of her influence. The suggestion in *The Ambassadors* is not just that Woollett is incapable of dealing with the particularity of experience, or that its attitude precludes the present moment, but that it has succeeded in displacing time completely. The past, the present, the future of Woollett have already been, so to speak; they are predetermined by the textual restriction of its reigning matriarch. (To this extent Mrs. Newsome resembles Madame de Bellegarde, *The American's* preserver of the *ancien régime*.) It is just this sense of prosaic detachment in Mrs. Newsome's manner that has led Martha Nussbaum to remark that people like Mrs. Newsome "triumph over life, they don't *live*" ("Perceptive Equilibrium," 69). The sense of safety a constructed past offers as a way of mediating between experience of the world as such and the illusion of experiencing the world is a characteristic Madame de Bellegarde and Mrs. Newsome share. James presents the ramifications of this manipulation of life by suggesting, via Mrs. Newsome, that Woollett cannot "live in the present moment" (68). In her own way Mrs. Newsome is an example of Walter Benjamin's angel of history. For like Benjamin's angel whose "face is turned toward the past," Mrs. Newsome too can only encounter the future when it has been filtered through and edited by what she knows to have already been accounted for in her understanding of experience (*Illuminations*, 258). Thus Strether's dilemma as an ambassadorial representative. His experience is already produced before he even sets sail: "I was booked," he says "by her vision" to find things according to "her book" (22:224). Woollett, as Strether eventually comes to realize, refuses to accept the fact that subjects, that truths, are multiple, and that given the differences between Paris and Woollett, the whole notion of containing categories is revealed to be an act of interpretive desperation or aggression whose goal is more readily understood as a denial of the claim experience makes and, as such, a denial of life itself. In Scott's formulation, like Simmel's, Mrs.

Newsome is a manifestation of the subject who, because she is so constituted, finds in the visible component of experience the ratification of her particular epistemological disposition. Again the point here is that these characters retreat into an almost holographic reality – one where illusion and insubstantiality stand in the place of the real thing and are accepted as such. If nothing else, James's texts, like *The Ambassadors*, work their way toward giving the lie to and exposing the dangers of treating experience as though it were a simple event one can verify visibly but whose challenge one can refuse to accept – a challenge which includes allowing experience to enter, upset, and perhaps overthrow the very nature of one's subjective construction.

III

In James's fiction *The Spoils of Poynton* can be seen as an objectification of the merely acquisitive view of experience. Here the spoils, Mrs. Gereth's collection of artifacts housed at Poynton, represent the sum total of her lived experiences. Upon visiting, Fleda Vetch sees that "Poynton was the record of a life," and that for Mrs. Gereth, "the sum of the world was rare French furniture and oriental china"(10:22, 24). For Mrs. Gereth, the spoils "were our religion, they were our life, they were *us*!" (10:30–31). Again, this mode of experience's limitations inheres in the very conception of experience itself. By classifying experience as something empirically verifiable, collectable, Mrs. Gereth creates herself in the spoils and consequently not only reifies her subjectivity – leaving her identity fixed in connection with the spoils – but seals off any possibility of growth outside her artificially circumscribed boundary. In Jamesian hermeneutics the drawbacks of this cumulative view become evident when one encounters something that cannot be contained within one's collective experiences, or when one is deprived of the artificial security this view offers and is required to make one's way through the world naked. Since experiences in the cumulative view form a bounded territory, not a general responsiveness to the world, the interpreting subject suddenly called to act appropriately in a unique situation will inevitably fail. *The Spoils of Poynton* dramatizes this probability when Poynton goes up in smoke. Deprived of her collection, Mrs. Gereth resigns herself to the oblivion of a non-productive mind. As she remarks to Fleda Vetch toward the novel's

end: "action's over, for me, for ever, and you'll have the great merit of knowing when I'm brutally silent what I shall be thinking about" (10:245). This vision of Mrs. Gereth's mental sterility, of her inability to engage in productive action, is, for James, the result of the cumulative attitude toward experience.

What James objectifies about experience in *The Spoils of Poynton* he also dramatizes in many of his Europeans who also collect experiences. These Europeans are experienced in a worldly sense, suggesting an attitude which holds that quantity of experience confers moral authority. Think, for instance, how Madame de Bellegarde or Prince Amerigo meet the requirements of this identity. Madame de Bellegarde, we recall, sets herself up as the measure of what constitutes acceptable national and personal action and declares "the Bellegardes have been used to set the example, not to wait for it" (252). As for *The Golden Bowl*, James makes the limitations of the cumulative view a main focus of the novel. When asked by Maggie how he will react to his developing knowledge of the Ververs, the Prince casually admits "I know enough, I feel, never to be surprised," only much later to complain to Charlotte Stant that "the difficulty is, and will always be, that I don't understand them" (23:8-9, 309). The Prince explains his subjective and cultural construction in language which matches James's characterization of the "experienced" European.

There are two parts of me ... One is made up of history, the doings, the marriages, the crimes, the follies, the boundless *bêtises* of other people ... Those things are written – literally in rows of volumes, in libraries; are as public as they're abominable ... (23:9)

The second part, of course, makes *The Golden Bowl* an intensely difficult novel and dramatizes the impossibility of understanding the particular merely by referring it back to one's knowledge of a type. This second part, "very much smaller," as Amerigo explains, "represents my single self, the unknown, unimportant ... personal quantity" which exceeds Maggie's capacity to understand it and leads the narrative eventually to destabilize if not destroy all sense of empirical certitudes in human affairs (23:9).

The cumulative view's limitations consist in artificially sealing the subject off from the world and wrongfully elevating it as a self-ratifying authority that passes judgment according to submerged and often unrecognizably self-serving certitudes. James challenges

these epistemological assumptions throughout his fiction by orchestrating his characters' deeply involved participation in alien worlds whose cultures and language force the visitor into a radical self-examination.⁶ In the juxtaposition of cultures James brings about a multidimensional revelation. The individual is suddenly made alien and forced to understand his cultural and personal beliefs in the context of an alien and refractory world. And the foreign world also finds its public and private assumptions suddenly called into question by an alien who simply *sees* things differently. The structure of this collision in James's texts points up the interpretive limitations and ethnocentric dangers associated with a self-serving, cumulative view of experience, and calls attention to the need to develop a subjectivity which is permeable and welcomes that which is alien as an opportunity to enlarge one's consciousness and understanding. In provoking this epistemological revelation James demystifies or diffuses the coerciveness of power rather than, as Seltzer argues, subtly reinforces the "criminal continuity between art and power" (*Henry James and the Art of Power*, 170). By stripping away what appear as interpretive or epistemological certitudes, James's hermeneutics strips away the ground on which the subject has been nurtured. Focusing on the experiential basis of this interpretive event in James's novels and the effect it has on his reading audience reveals how theories of reading James which neglect to consider the hermeneutic-phenomenological politics of experience limit the incredibly complicated nature of culture, identity, and aesthetics in his work. In the collision between what one thought and what is, between one's conception of self and that which says no to you, James's fictions open a conceptual rift which forces interpretive revision and engagement in a way that makes his novels not just live and active, but lived, empowering experiences. To this extent, James's understanding of the need to cultivate a vigilant and undogmatic openness to experience so as to bring about an understanding of the multifoldness of reality parallels Gadamer's assessment of experience in *Truth and Method*. Where James sees the goal of experience to be an inclination toward new experiences, Gadamer sees the "truth of experience" as containing "an orientation towards new experiences." The experienced person, in Gadamer's understanding, is not someone who "knows everything and knows better than anyone else," like Madame de Bellegarde or, interestingly, Mrs. Newsome, but someone who is "open to new experiences," someone

who “is radically undogmatic; who because of the many experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them.” As Gadamer goes on to explain, the “dialectic of experience has its own fulfillment not in definitive knowledge,” as though experience aimed at finality James would say, “but in that openness to experience that is encouraged by experience itself” (319). The difficulty, James and Gadamer would say, is in realizing the difference between an open inclination to experience and merely operating under an illusion of openness that covers up rigorous efforts at controlling, imposing, and determining meaning.

We can see this distinction at work in *The Sacred Fount*, which stands out as James’s most problematic venture into the confusing realm of interpretation. In this text the nameless narrator occupies the position of Jamesian observer watching a group of people assembled at a country estate called “Newmarch.” Much to the narrator’s alarm, he believes he is witnessing vampiristic behavior among the couples present and eventually builds an interpretive house of cards in order to support his observations. Individuals who at first appeared aged have become remarkably young, while their more youthful counterparts have seemingly aged at an accelerated pace; the same holds for the intelligence of others, for the more dull have become keen and the keen more dull. At a loss to explain these transformations the narrator comes up with the analogy of a sacred fount which each of the rejuvenated guests must somehow be visiting. For Jamesians, *The Sacred Fount* foregrounds in a way none of his other texts do the inherently tenuous and compositional nature of understanding. Yet while this text challenges the very nature of understanding, questioning whether such a thing is even possible beyond the various interpretive and epistemological high jinks we perform, it ultimately delivers a specific message about the hermeneutic trap the process of interpretation is always waiting to spring. The narrator’s first sentence both initiates the potential dangers James saw in the act of interpretation and, in its use of the word “ambiguities,” highlights the vagaries of understanding which characterize James’s fiction: “It was an occasion, I felt – the prospect of a large party – to look out at the station for others, possible friends and even possible enemies, who might be going. Such premonitions, it was true, bred fears when they failed to breed hopes, though it was to be added that there were sometimes, in the case, rather happy ambiguities” (*Sacred Fount*, 1). It

is the narrator's "premonitions" and how they lead to "ambiguities" James wants us to be wary of here. Like Gadamerian foreconceptions and prejudices, premonitions are manipulative interpretive devices that mediate between the reality of an event and one's interpretation of it. Time and again throughout the course of this narrator's efforts at detection James betrays the dangers of the hermeneutic circle. For instance, with each new seeming "discovery," the narrator assumes he has found another piece of what is actually his own puzzle: "the next moment I was in all but full enjoyment of the piece wanted to make all my other pieces right – right because of that special beauty in my scheme through which the whole depended so on each part and each part so guaranteed the whole" (223). Readers of *The Sacred Fount* find "ambiguities" at the turn of every sentence and find in each sentence reasons why they should doubt the whole proceedings, agreeing with Mrs. Brissenden that the narrator is "crazy," just as much as they find reasons why Mrs. Briss is wrong and the narrator alarmingly astute (318). James complicates the hermeneutic challenge in *The Sacred Fount* by allowing the narrator to make a proactive gesture against simply being wrong. In ceding the possibility of "happy ambiguities," James's narrator finds shelter behind an admitted possibility that his interpretation may not be wholly accurate, even that he himself might be subject to error. In other words, one thing *The Sacred Fount* offers in this early sentence is a key to the incredibly complicated and celebrated notion of ambiguity in James. Jamesian ambiguity, like all ambiguity, is always under subjective control and, as such, can never really be refuted. Mrs. Briss is right and wrong. The narrator may and may not be "crazy." The resolution of the ambiguity here rests on the reader's comfort in discerning what is what. And the ability to reach that understanding depends on the reader's ability to avoid acting on "premonitions" or foreconceptions, which include being wary of the traps the text lays, such as Mrs. Briss's attempt to interject the "Truth," which is her truth masquerading as something larger. In Jamesian terms, real understanding will depend on the reader's ability to become "one of the people on whom nothing is lost" ("Art of Fiction," *Literary Criticism*, 1, 53). This is what James means when he speaks of experience as being "never limited," of "reality" as having "a myriad forms," and a "measure" that is "very difficult to fix" (52, 51, 52).

In a most interesting way then, *The Sacred Fount* represents the attenuated extreme of the cumulative notion of understanding. The

narrator's detective enterprise relies on his ability not only to accumulate impressions or evidence, but then to piece that evidence into a plausible picture of what is taking place at Newmarch. The irony James never lets his readers escape, though, is that the created picture is not really a response to what is going on, but something more like an image that emerges when one follows a paint-by-number template. The narrator's "premonitions" produce the template, all the evidence he discovers is subsequently shaped by and made to fit the overarching design. To this extent then, the narrator's behavior, while more pathological, is really no different than Mrs. Gereth's, Mrs. Newsome's, Madame de Bellegarde's, or the Governess's in *The Turn of the Screw*. Paul Armstrong provides a strong argument that *The Sacred Fount's* "experiments with representation" dramatize the "vicissitudes of understanding" in James's texts and that this text ultimately "shows how the late style offers the reader an ongoing challenge to reflect about hermeneutic processes that traditional fiction relies on for its mimetic effects" (*Challenge*, 31). In being continually forced to reassess the narrator's interpretive accuracy as well as the basic premonitions which lead him to see things as one way rather than another, the reader is called upon to make his or her own interpretive judgments and in that process made aware not only of being invited into the events of the text, but in being invited to offer challenge to the authorized interpretation, made to think about what role his or her own "premonitions" play in the final interpretive product.

It is not by accident then that in forcing interpretive engagement on his readers James subtly and significantly changes the reading event from a passive enterprise to an active process in which the reader is initiated into the very processes of artistic production which lead to a heightened ability to understand. In his testimonial to the artist's power in "The Art of Fiction," James praises this ability as the "power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern" (53). The idea of interpretive product is central. What *The Sacred Fount* eventually forces one to admit is that interpretations are produced which inevitably differ according to the individual viewer's perspective, or, in the language of the text, "premonitions." By calling attention to the role "premonitions" and "ambiguities" (however "happy") play in our conception of reality, James mirrors his brother William's similar concerns as described in his *Pragmatism*. Like

Henry, William was alarmed at the sloppy ways in which "reality" and "truth" were treated as somehow simultaneous and self-ratifying. "Truth," as both William and Henry explained, was really nothing more than the knowing subject's idiosyncratic interpretation of "reality," whereas "reality" was something far more elusive and always already mediated by human understanding, as William scornfully pointed out: "If so vulgar an expression were allowed us, we might say that wherever we find it, it has already been *faked*" (*Pragmatism*, 119–20). And as William held a commitment to the public role of philosophy, Henry also understood the public responsibilities of the artist and saw as part of his role the need to divest his audience of its unknown interpretive constraints. Thus, in recognizing the mediated nature of understanding, readers come to see our inevitable attempts to fix interpretation within systems produced by the interpreting subject either with or without his or her knowledge. In Jamesian hermeneutics, the exposure of this scheme is the first step toward understanding, is what allows one to step away from the self-generated holographic reality that has been masquerading as the real thing and adopt a more novelistic perspective through which we come to recognize the machinery of interpretation as much as we do interpretation's final product.

James contrasts this cumulative view with a conception of experience which not only conditions one to be open to the possibility of experience but brings about an understanding, as James says in the Preface to *The American*, that "the real represents . . . the things we cannot possibly *not* know, sooner or later, in one way or another" (1062–63). James goes on in this Preface to explain how a cumulative view of experience is insufficient because "one of the accidents of our hampered state" is that "particular instances" which cannot be contained within any closed system "have not yet come our way" (1063). James's most recognized testament to the need to cultivate a receptiveness to experience is in "The Art of Fiction" where his injunctions to the artist are also injunctions to the audience. When he advises the artist to become "'one of the people on whom nothing is lost'" (53), his comments are also directed at readers who should recognize that "the novel," when "regarded as something more than a simple *jeu d'esprit*, . . . treats of life at large and helps us to *know*" ("Nana," *Literary Criticism*, II, 869). To this end, James makes an elaborate connection between art and life, between openness and experience, and between experience and knowledge,